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AUTHOR Ediger, Marlow
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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes each of three different plans of reading instruction and raises questions regarding these individual plans of teaching reading. The paper first discusses state standards and the reading curriculum and whether state-mandated testing improves the reading curriculum. In contrast to state-mandated testing, it then considers humanism as a psychology of learning that makes for a good reading curriculum. Finally, the paper discusses basal readers and the reading curriculum. (NKA)

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What Makes for a Good Reading Curriculum?

by Marlow Ediger

M. Ediger

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WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD READING CURRICULUM?

There are many proposals for making for a good reading curriculum. The proposals may and do vary much from each other. Reading is the first of the three rs -- reading, writing, and arithmetic, and thus is receiving much attention by leaders in state and national government levels. Each of three different plans of reading instruction will be analyzed with questions being raised pertaining to these individual plans of teaching reading.

State Standards and the Reading Curriculum

The testing and measurement movement is strong in the nation with state and national governments feeling they have a strong stake in pupil achievement, especially in reading instruction. The newly signed extension of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) includes public school pupils being required to be tested in grades three through eight annually. Reasons given for annual testing of pupil achievement are the following:

1. pupils need to achieve high standards and meet state standards (objectives) of reading instruction. The nation's survival depends upon high learner achievement.
2. pupils should not be passed on to the next higher grade level unless they achieve at a satisfactory level on the state test.
3. pupils need to receive remedial help on what was missed on a state mandated test. Diagnosis and remediation are emphasized on the state mandated test.
4. pupils may experience high stakes testing whereby a high school diploma may be denied if a final test is failed.
5. pupils may not be promoted to the next grade level if a state mandated test is not passed.
7. pupils need to experience an aligned reading curriculum which harmonizes with the state standards.
8. pupils need to possess background information and skills which harmonize with the state standards and tests.
9. pupils need to possess test taking skills in order to be ready for state testing and measurement procedures.
10. pupils need to realize they will be compared to others. Thus, a school/district may be compared in test results with others in what is known as a report card. The report card is published in the news media and is open to the public (Ediger, 2000, Chapter One).

Test results from state mandated tests are to indicate how well a pupil is achieving in reading instruction. One test score will then show how well a pupil is achieving. However, the published report card will provide averages when comparing one school/district with another. Multiple choice test items are generally written on state mandated tests. This allows no room for creativity such as in pupils written creative endeavors, Nor does it permit pupil input into the testing situation such as questions raised by learners if a lack of clarity is perceived in a multiple choice item. Demographic information from test results is to be provided such as the numbers of individuals passed or failed based on gender, race, income levels, among others. Gaps in achievement between the different groups such as minorities versus the more favored individuals in society are to be closed by teachers in the classroom. Idaho, using online testing, (Olson, January 23, 2002) has taken a lead in computer use to rapidly report pupil and district level state mandated test scores:

The new multiple choice exams in mathematics, reading, and language arts, for students in grades two through nine, will be administered twice a year, in the fall and in the spring. Students will receive their scores immediately upon finishing the assessments, while teachers will obtain class summaries within 24 hours, and schools and districts will receive results within 72 hours.

Idaho joins a handful of states, including Georgia, Virginia, South Dakota, and Oregon -- that have either or are moving toward online testing. Idaho's, though, is expected to differ significantly from most of the others'.

Questions which may be raised pertaining to state mandated testing to improve the reading curriculum are the following:

1. Is a testing situation a normal place/time to reveal reading achievement and progress?
2. Are the test items too fragmented and unrelated to each other? Test items are to be unrelated to each other so as to not give clues for responding to other items on the test; however, in a normal reading situation, it is ideal if pupils perceive knowledge as being related so that additional reading becomes more meaningful and sequential.
3. Has the state mandated test been pilot tested to take out kinks and weaknesses? Reliability data from pilot studies are important, be it test/retest, split half, and/or alternative forms.
4. Is the state mandated test truly valid in that it will

measure actual reading achievement and not something else? The mandated test needs to be adequately validated, including the use of concurrent validity data.

5. Are there end of course mandated tests or do they cover a wider scope of time? (See Parker, 2001).

State mandated tests need to be refined continuously. They could provide excellent data when used for diagnosis and remediation purposes. High stakes testing is a rather risky endeavor, if one test determines a pupil's future.

Advocates of state mandated testing then believe that a good reading curriculum will result if the stakes are set high in motivating pupil achievement.

Pupil Input and the Reading Curriculum

In contrast to state mandated testing in making for a good reading curriculum, humanism as a psychology of learning advocates pupil input into emphasizing a developmental program of teaching. Pupils sequence their very own learning opportunities. Sequence resides within the learner, not from external sources. Thus, for example, a committee of students with teacher assistance may select a paperback to read. Each member in the committee has a copy of the chosen paperback. The teacher supervises, encourages, and stimulates pupil reading. After completing the reading of the paperback, learners discuss the contents gleaned from reading. In a circular seating arrangement, members might have no chairperson, but leadership in the discussion emerges and changes, depending upon the succession of participants within the discussion. There is much latitude in what is being discussed. Thus, the following might be inherent with pupils

1. discussing facts, concepts, and generalizations.
2. engaging in probing and moving toward higher levels of thinking.
3. participating in problem solving. Here, pupils define a problem, gather information from a variety of reference sources, achieve an hypothesis, evaluate the hypothesis, as well as modify/revise or accept the hypothesis as evidence warrants.
4. emphasizing critical and creative thinking about content read.
5. indicating what has been comprehended in reading with a group project. Multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 1993) might be used whereby each pupil uses his/her personal talents in developing the cooperative evaluative project.

Portfolios may be developed by each pupil to show what has been achieved in reading. Each portfolio contains a file of pupil products to show reading achievement.

Reasons given for emphasizing humanism as psychology of reading instruction include the following:

1. motivation for learning to read and reading to learn is intrinsic and comes from the pupil.
2. pupil interest is a powerful factor in reading and learning. Pupils tend to choose reading materials which are interesting.
3. purpose for reading comes from within the learner. Learners choose that which possesses purpose or reasons for reading.
4. sequence or order of learnings developed reside within the pupil, not from external sources.
5. reading achievement is highly individualized with learners individually being at different levels of attainment. Thus, goals to achieve are not standardized, but come from the pupil (See Gunning, 2000).

Questions which might be raised of humanism as a psychology of reading instruction include the following:

1. How close can objective evaluation results from pupils' portfolios be stated measurably? For example, rubrics are used to evaluate pupil achievement from portfolios, and these are scored by competent people in the field with numerical indicators given. Portfolios contain a variety of written and art work products to reveal reading achievement.
2. How reliable and consistent are the evaluations given to each portfolio by evaluators. Thus, is high interrater or interscorer reliability in evidence?
3. How long would it take to score portfolios in a state to provide learner achievement results, since these cannot be scored with computer service?
4. How can a portfolio of daily pupil products be comprehensive and yet be manageable for rubric scoring?
5. How well do portfolios work in reporting pupil progress to parents when an adequate number of entries are in evidence for each? Parents viewing a portfolio may be overwhelmed while looking at the total number of entries (Ediger, 2001, Chapter Seven).

Portfolios are quite opposite of testing to reveal pupil achievement in reading. The every day products of pupils'

school work are in a portfolio, whereas state accountability laws in testing contain no pupil entries from any day of schooling.

Basal Readers and the Reading Curriculum

Many school systems continue to adopt basal readers to provide major learnings for pupils in reading. Reading specialists have selected the sequential stories for the basal to be read by pupils. The manual of the basal contains suggested objectives, learning opportunities, and evaluation techniques for teacher use in teaching. The basal and the manual together could provide the reading curriculum for pupils. However, the reading teacher might well be quite creative in using these materials of instruction. Thus, the teacher might use some of the objectives in the manual for pupils to achieve. Also, the teacher may bring in some of his/her teaching suggestions to use in reading instruction as well as use those in the manual. The evaluation techniques in the manual may be used, in part, together with other reputable procedures to assess pupil reading progress.

Reasons given for using basals to teach reading are the following:

1. the reading curriculum has been planned for teachers, thus minimizing efforts involved when starting from scratch.
2. the teacher may be highly creative in basal and manual use when developing the reading curriculum.
3. diagnosis and remediation of reading problems of a pupil may occur within context as teaching and learning occur.
4. the teacher may provide sequential learning opportunities to minimize possible pupil difficulties in reading.
5. basals and the manual are neutral devices and success in use might well depend upon the teacher.
6. the teacher needs to develop background experiences for pupils to benefit from each reading activity.
7. word recognition skills may be developed within pupils as needed. Thus phonics, syllabication, sight word skills, and use of context clues may be taught as needed. The manual might well provide suggestions for developing these skills within learners.
8. suggestions for comprehension skills are also emphasized in the manual section of the basal. Skills such as reading for facts, meaningful concepts, and generalizations may then be stressed, along with other higher cognitive comprehension objectives.
9. the evaluation techniques suggested for use in the

manual section may be harmonized with state mandated standards in reading.

10. basal readers may be used along with other recommended approaches in teaching and learning, such as individualized reading (Ediger, 2002, 16- 19).

There are then a plethora of advantages in the use of basals in the reading curriculum. However, there can be trade offs in that basal reader use has selected disadvantages. The following questions may then be raised about basal reader use:

1. will teachers become rigid and formal in the use of basals and their manuals? With formality and rigidity, individual differences and pupil needs in reading instruction may not be met.
2. will the basal reading program become the sole program of instruction? This might then eliminate other programs of instruction which can be integrated and implemented.
3. will pupil learning styles harmonize with basal reader instructional approaches?
4. will pupils benefit more from an individualized reading program whereby the learner selects and sequences materials of instruction used?
5. will pupils benefit more from the basal as compared to individualized approaches in reading instruction?
6. will creative teaching suffer when teachers depend too much upon the manual of the basal reader for teaching suggestions?
7. will pupils of different achievement levels receive developmentally sound instruction?
8. will teachers be able to create interest in pupil's reading content from the basal?
9. will teachers be able to develop purpose or reasons for reading from the basal?
10. will teachers be able to establish meaningful reading experiences for learners (See Hoffman, 1998)?

Reading teachers need to work in the direction of implementing answers to the above named questions. To teach well, each teacher needs to identify questions and seek answers in order to implement quality teaching strategies regardless of the plan(s) used in reading instruction. Learning to read and reading to learn are salient factors to stress in ongoing lessons and units in reading instruction.

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